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Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
Animal Dreams

Author: Barbara Kingsolver

Born April 8, 1955, in Annapolis, MD; daughter of Wendell R. (a physician) and Virginia (a homemaker; maiden name, Henry) Kingsolver; married Joseph Hoffmann (a chemist), April 15, 1985 (divorced); married Steven Hopp; children: (first marriage) Camille; (second marriage) Lily. Education: DePauw University, B.A. (magna cum laude), 1977; University of Arizona, M.S., 1981, and additional graduate study. Politics: "Human rights activist." Religion: "Pantheist." Hobbies and other interests: Music, hiking, gardening, parenthood. Memberships: Amnesty International, National Writers Union, National TV Turnoff, Environmental Defense, PEN West, Phi Beta Kappa, Heifer International, Green Empowerment. Address: Agent: Frances Goldin, 57 East Eleventh St., New York, NY 10003

Name: Barbara Kingsolver
Born: April 15, 1985
Education: DePauw University, B.A, University of Arizona, M.S.
Agent: Frances Goldin, 57 East Eleventh St., New York, NY 10003

Career:
University of Arizona, Tucson, research assistant in department of physiology, 1977-79, technical writer in office of arid lands studies, 1981-85; freelance journalist, 1985-87; writer, 1987-.

Awards:
Feature-writing award, Arizona Press Club, 1986; American Library Association awards, 1988, for *The Bean Trees*, and 1990, for "Homeland" citation of accomplishment from United Nations National Council of Women, 1989; PEN fiction prize and Edward Abbey Ecofiction Award, both 1991, both for *Animal Dreams*; Woodrow Wilson Foundation/Lila Wallace fellow, 1992-93; D.Litt., DePauw University, 1994; Book Sense Book of the Year Award, 2000, for *The Poisonwood Bible*; National Humanities Medal, 2000.

Writings:
The Bean Trees (novel), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1988.
Homeland and Other Stories (includes "Homeland," "Islands on the Moon," "Quality Time," "Covered Bridges," "Rose-Johnny," and "Why I Am a Danger to the Public"), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1989.
Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983 (nonfiction), ILR Press (Ithaca, NY), 1989, with new introduction, 1996.
Animal Dreams (novel), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1990.
Another America/Otra America (poetry), Seal Press (Seal Beach, CA), 1992, 2nd expanded edition, 1998.
Pigs in Heaven (novel) HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1993.
High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1995.
The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel, HarperFlamingo (New York, NY), 1998.
(Author of foreword) Joseph Barbato and Lisa Weinerman Horak, editors, *Off the Beaten Path: Stories Place,* Nature Conservancy (Arlington, VA), 1998.

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Writings: (continued)

Prodigal Summer, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2000.
(Editor, with Katrina Kenison, and author of introduction) *The Best American Short Stories, 2001*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2001.
Small Wonder (essays), illustrated by Paul Mirocha, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2002.
Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands (nonfiction), photographs by Annie Griffiths Belt, National Geographic Society (Washington, DC), 2002.
(Author of foreword) Norman Wirzhar, editor, *The Essential Agrarian Reader,* University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2003.

Contributor to anthologies, including *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 1988*, edited by S. Ravenel, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1988; *New Writers of the Purple Sage: An Anthology of Recent Western Writing,* edited by Russell Martin, Penguin (New York, NY), 1992; *The Single Mother's Companion: Essays and Stories by Women,* edited by Marsha R. Leslie, Seal Press (Seattle, WA), 1994; *Mid-life Confidential: The Rock Bottom Remainders,* edited by Dave Marsh, Viking (New York, NY), 1994; *Journeys*, edited by PEN-Faulkner Foundation, Quill & Bush (Rockville, MD), 1994; *Heart of the Land: Essays on Last Great Places,* edited by Joseph Barbato, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1994; *I've Always Meant to Tell You: Letters to Our Mothers,* edited by Constance Warlow, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1997; and *Intimate Nature: The Bond between Women and Animals,* edited by Linda Hogan, D. Metzger, and B. Peterson, Ballantine (New York, NY), 1998. Contributor of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry to numerous periodicals, including *Calyx, Cosmopolitan, Heresies, Mademoiselle, McCall's, New Mexico Humanities Review, Redbook, Sojourner, Tucson Weekly, Virginia Quarterly Review, Progressive,* and *Smithsonian.* Reviewer for *New York Times Book Review* and *Los Angeles Times Book Review.*

Media Adaptations:

Most of Kingsolver's novels have been adapted as audiobooks.

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Sidelights:

Best-selling author Barbara Kingsolver infuses her writings with a strong sense of family, relationships, and community. Kingsolver draws her characters from middle America—the shop owners, the unemployed, the displaced, the homeless, the mothers and children struggling to survive—and depicts how, by banding together, these seemingly forgotten people can thrive. As a firm believer in human dignity and worth, Kingsolver fills her works with themes of inspiration, love, strength, and endurance. Many critics have applauded her tenderness toward her characters and praise her insight into human nature, political repression, and ecological imperatives. In *New York Times*, Janet Maslin cited Kingsolver for her "sweet, ennobling enthusiasm for every natural phenomenon" as well as for an "overarching wisdom and passion."

Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees,* was published to an enthusiastic critical reception in 1988. The novel focuses on the relationships among a group of women and is narrated by Taylor Greer, a young, strong-willed Kentucky woman who leaves her homeland in search of a better life. During her westward travel, Taylor unexpectedly becomes the caretaker of a withdrawn two-year-old Cherokee girl named Turtle. Eventually the two settle in Arizona, where they find "an odd but dedicated 'family' in Tucson," the author once explained. Included in this clan are Lou Ann Ruiz, a dejected mother whose husband has just left her, and Mattie, a warmhearted widow who runs the Jesus Is Lord Used Tires company. According to the author, "a new comprehension of responsibility" motivates Taylor to help Mattie shelter refugees from politically turbulent Central America.

Critics responded enthusiastically to *The Bean Trees,* noting the novel's sensitivity, humor, and lyricism. *The Bean Trees* "is as richly connected as a fine poem, but reads like realism," commented Jack Butler in *New York Times Book Review.* "From the very first page, Kingsolver's characters tug at the heart and soul," Karen FitzGerald noted in *Ms.* that "It is the growing strength of their relationships... that gives the novel its energy and appeal." And Margaret Randall in *Women's Review of Books* called *The Bean Trees* "a story propelled by a marvelous ear, a fast-moving humor and the powerful undercurrent of human struggle."

Favorable critical reviews also attended Kingsolver's next work, *Homeland and Other Stories.* Comprised of twelve short stories, *Homeland* relates stirring tales of individuals—mainly women—who struggle to find homes for themselves. Reviewers especially praised the title story, which reveals an aged Indian woman's disillusionment when she sees that her beloved Cherokee homeland has been transformed into a tourist trap. Another tale, "Islands on the Moon," shows how a mother and daughter—both single and pregnant—reconcile after years of estrangement. Among the distinctive characters that fill the remaining stories in the collection are a reformed thief striving for an honest living, a resilient union activist, a middle-class wife engaging in a secret affair, and a poor girl who befriends an outcast. Critics applauded Kingsolver's poetic language, her realistic portrayals of human nature, and her genuinely engaging tales. "Of the twelve stories in this first collection," remarked Russell Banks in *New York Times Book Review,* "all are interesting and most are extraordinarily fine." *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Bill Mahin called Kingsolver "an extraordinary storyteller."

While completing *Homeland and Other Stories* Kingsolver also completed *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983,* a nonfiction book tracing the role of women during the Phelps Dodge Copper Company labor conflict. A year later, she returned to fiction with *Animal Dreams,* a novel that follows the growth of Codi Noline, an insecure woman who returns to her agricultural hometown of Grace, Arizona, after a fourteen-year absence. Characters' personal conflicts coupled with political struggles form the core of the novel. Codi finds her native community less than ideal: she faces grief, bigotry, disease, and environmental pollution and, through letters from her activist sister, learns of the political brutalities of Central America. Critics called the novel compassionate, humorous, and inspiring and praised Kingsolver's ability to mix commentary on political, social, racial, and personal turmoil. "*Animal Dreams* belongs to a new fiction of relationship, aesthetically rich and of great political and spiritual significance and power," wrote Ursula K. Le Guin in *Washington Post Book World.* "This is a sweet book, full of bitter pain; a beautiful weaving of the light and the dark."

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Sidelights: (Continued)

Animal Dreams is "a complex, passionate, bravely challenging book," maintained Melissa Pritchard in *Chicago's Tribune Books,* the critic going on to call Kingsolver "a writer of rare ambition and unequivocal talent."

In 1993 Kingsolver published *Pigs in Heaven,* a sequel to *The Bean Trees* that takes place three years after Taylor illegally adopts Turtle. In a strange turn of events, Turtle sees a man fall into the spillway of the Hoover Dam during a family vacation. Because of Turtle's insistence, Taylor sees to it that the man is rescued. The two become local heroes and are invited to appear on *Oprah Winfrey Show*. This newfound fame turns out to have unexpected consequences, however, as Cherokee lawyer Annawake Fourkiller sees the show and decides to investigate Taylor's adoption of Turtle. Threatened with losing her daughter, Taylor flees Arizona, beginning a difficult journey of economic struggle and emotional turbulence. Eventually, Taylor's mother Alice joins the pair in their flight, bringing her own wry perspective on life and undergoing her own personal journey.

Travis Silcox, writing in *Belles Lettres,* noted that, "despite its action, the novel suffers from a midpoint flatness." However, he praised Kingsolver's talent for characterization, adding that her "supporting characters enrich the story." Reviewer Wendy Smith likewise commended the novel, concluding in *Washington Post Book World* that "like all of Kingsolver's fiction, *Pigs in Heaven* fulfills the longings of the head and the heart with an inimitable blend of challenging ideas, vibrant characters and prose that sings.... It seems there's nothing she can't do." Karen Karbo averred in *New York Times Book Review* that Kingsolver's grip on the material she is writing is both skillful and satisfying: "As the novel progresses, she somehow manages to maintain her political views without sacrificing the complexity of her characters' predicaments." Karbo concluded that Kingsolver is "possessed of an extravagantly gifted narrative voice, she blends a fierce and abiding moral vision with benevolent, concise humor. Her medicine is meant for the head, the heart and the soul—and it goes down dangerously, blissfully, easily."

While Kingsolver's early novels are typically intimate domestic dramas, 1998's *The Poisonwood Bible* is something quite different: a penetrating exploration of one American family's troubled sojourn in Africa. The novel's sweeping scope and its portrayal of African politics during the cold war marked a thematic departure for the author. It also proved to be a bestseller. In the wake of Kingsolver's success with *The Poisonwood Bible, Nation* contributor John Leonard heralded the writer as "at last our very own [Doris] Lessing and our very own [Nadine] Gordimer, and she is, as one of her characters said of another in an earlier novel, 'beautiful beyond the speed of light.'"

With *The Poisonwood Bible,* Kingsolver established a prominent place in American letters. The epic tale introduces the Price family—father Nathan, an evangelical missionary, his wife Orleanna, and their four daughters. The story begins as the family arrives in the Congo—now Zaire—as missionaries, and events are related from the point of view of Orleanna and the four young girls. Quickly it becomes apparent that Nathan Price is a violent fanatic whose mispronunciation of the local language only serves to alienate the African villagers. The Price women struggle against starvation, sickness, and predatory ants while Nathan sinks further and further into zealous madness. His bumbling serves to indict American behavior in Africa in a microcosm, but Kingsolver also explores the violent American intervention in Congolese affairs during the Eisenhower era and the role that intervention played in destabilizing an emerging nation. According to Verlyn Klinkenborg in *New York Times Book Review, The Poisonwood Bible* is "a story about the loss of one faith and the discovery of another.... Ultimately a novel of character, a narrative shaped by keen-eyed women contemplating themselves and one another and a village whose familiarity it takes a tragedy to discover."

Kingsolver animates *The Poisonwood Bible* with recollections of time she herself spent in the Belgian Congo, several years later than the 1963 setting of her novel. To quote Michiko Kakutani in *New York Times,* the "powerful... book is actually an old-fashioned nineteenth-century novel, a Hawthornian tale of sin and redemption and the 'dark necessity' of history." Kakutani added that the tale grapples with "social injustice, with the

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Sidelights: (Continued)

intersection of public events with private concerns and the competing claims of community and individual will." *In Nation*, Leonard likewise called *The Poisonwood Bible* "a magnificent fiction and a ferocious bill of indictment.... As in the keyed chords of a Baroque sonata, movements of the personal, the political, the historical and even the biological contrast and correspond. As in a Bach cantata, the choral stanza, the recitatives and the da capo arias harmonize. And a magical-realist forest sings itself to live forever."

Though the majority of reviewers applauded Kingsolver for her work in T*he Poisonwood Bible,* there were a few dissenters. *Christianity Today* correspondent Tim Stafford maintained that Kingsolver "offers a cartoonish story of idiot missionaries and shady CIA operatives destroying the delicate fabric of the Congo, like bulldozers scraping their way through the forest jungle." Critics who were not won over by the novel were rare, however. More reflective of the majority view, a *Publishers Weekly* critic described the book as "a compelling family saga, a sobering picture of the horrors of fanatic fundamentalism and an insightful view of an exploited country." In *Booklist,* Donna Seaman commended *The Poisonwood Bible* as an "extraordinarily dramatic and forthright novel... a measureless saga of hubris and deliverance." A *Time* reviewer felt that the author's female characters "carry a story that moves through its first half like a river in flood." And in *Progressive,* Ruth Conniff praised Kingsolver for "writing a moving book that makes [political] ideas both personal and timely. Kingsolver is a terrific fiction writer."

Prodigal Summer is similar to Kingsolver's earlier novels in its sense of place and its more intimate scope. Three story lines gradually converge as residents of southern Appalachia respond in various ways to the wealth of nature surrounding them. According to Jennifer Schuessler in *New York Times Book Review,* readers of *Animal Dreams* and *The Bean Trees* "will find themselves back on familiar, well-cleared ground of plucky heroines, liberal politics and vivid descriptions of the natural world."

The three segments of *Prodigal Summer* introduce Deanna Wolfe, a wildlife biologist who seeks to protect a clan of coyotes from a poacher who eventually becomes her lover. Another segment is devoted to the predicament of Lusa Maluf Landowski Widener, a Palestinian-Jewish hybrid housewife who must stake a claim to her piece of Appalachia after her husband dies. The final segment introduces a pair of feuding neighbors, traditional farmer Garnett Walker and his organic opponent Nannie Rawley, whose search for common ground ends in unstated affection for one another. Gradually the three separate plots weave together toward an ending that affirms the power of nature. Maslin, in her *New York Times* review of *Prodigal Summer,* deemed the work "an improbably appealing book with the feeling of a nice stay inside a terrarium." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer also felt that readers would respond "to the sympathy with which [Kingsolver] reflects the difficult lives of people struggling on the hard edge of poverty." Michael Tyrell, writing in *Us,* suggested that, despite some passages that read like "overzealous lectures on ecology," *Prodigal Summer* excels in its "spirited, captivating heroine."

Kingsolver's 1992 book *Another America/Otra America* proved to be somewhat of a departure. Composed of original poetry, it also includes Spanish translations of her poems within the same volume. Reviewer Lorraine Elena Roses, commenting in *Women's Review of Books* on the presence of the translations, stated that "it's clear from the outset that Kingsolver feels a deep connection to the Spanish-speaking lands that begin before the Rio Grande and stretch all the way to the windswept limits of Tierra del Fuego." Kingsolver's poems explore her feelings about Latino human rights activists, Latin American victimization, and North American prejudices. *School Library Journal* contributor Deanna Kuhn called the book a "powerful collection." While praising Kingsolver's technical skill, Roses questioned whether "lyrical poetry [can] bear the weight of politics," but concluded that Kingsolver's poems "will appeal primarily to those who seek to commemorate and mark political occasions."

In *High Tide in Tucson*, published in 1995, Kingsolver offers opinions on a myriad of topics, from motherhood to the effect of the Gulf War. A *Kirkus Reviews* critic, while finding fault with the author's "hit-or-miss musings"

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Sidelights: (Continued)

and "smarmy self-reflections," commended Kingsolver's facility with nature writing. A second essay collection, *Small Wonder,* collects twenty-three essays on a variety of topics. While many essays were published previously, the book includes three written in collaboration with Kingsolver's husband, Steven Hopp. Subject matter ranges from the Columbine High School, Colorado, shootings to television, the homeless, and the difficulties of writing about sex. Judith Bromberg pointed out in *National Catholic Reporter* that *Small Wonder* came about after Kingsolver was asked to respond to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States. She wrote five responsive essays in one month, all of which are included in this collection. Bromberg noted that, whether written before or after September 11, the essays "reflect [the event's] enormous reality and either draw meaning from it or attempt to lend some clarity to it." Piers Moore Ede commented in *Earth Island Journal* that Kingsolver's essays serve as "compelling, provocative... meditations" on how the event changed the world, and commended the author for having the courage to suggest that the attacks were perhaps a political protest against the "American Way."

Kingsolver has described herself as "a writer of the working class" who views her art as a daily job. "My idea of a pre-writing ritual is getting the kids on the bus and sitting down," she said in a *Book Page* online interview. Elsewhere in the same interview she outlined her goals as an author. "I'm extremely interested in cultural difference, in social and political history, and the sparks that fly when people with different ways of looking at the world come together and need to reconcile or move through or celebrate those differences," she said. "All that precisely describes everything I've ever written."

As an extension of her belief in literary fiction as a force for social change, Kingsolver has established and funded the Bellwether Prize. Awarded biennially, the prize consists of a $25,000 cash payment and guaranteed publication for a novel manuscript by an author who has not previously been widely published. The goal of the Bellwether Prize is to promote writing, reading, and publication of literary fiction that addresses issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships.

Author: Barbara Kingsolver (7)

Writings by the Author:

Books

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 55, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1989.

Periodicals

African Business, March, 1999, Christy Nevin, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 56.
Belles Lettres, fall, 1993, Travis Silcox, review of *Pigs in Heaven,* pp. 4, 42.
Bloomsbury Review, November-December, 1990.
Booklist, February 15, 1992, p. 1083; August, 1998, Donna Seaman, review of *The Poisonwood Bible,* p. 1922.
Chicago Tribune, May 18, 1988; June 23, 1989; July 11, 1993, p. 3.
Christianity Today, January 11, 1999, Tim Stafford, review of *The Poisonwood Bible,* p. 88.
Cosmopolitan, March, 1988.
Courier Journal (Louisville, KY), April 24, 1988.
Earth Island Journal, winter, 2002, Piers Moore Ede, review of *Small Wonder,* p. 45.
English Journal, January, 1994.
Entertainment Weekly, November 5, 1999, Rebecca Ascher-Walsh, "Kingsolver for a Day, " p. 75.
Kirkus Reviews, August 1, 1995, p. 1080.
Los Angeles Times, April 3, 1988; April 24, 1988.
Los Angeles Times Book Review, July 16, 1989, September 9, 1990; July 4, 1993, pp. 2, 8.
Ms., April, 1988, Karen Fitzgerald, review of *The Bean Trees.*
Nation, January 11, 1999, John Leonard, review of *The Poisonwood Bible,* p. 28.
National Catholic Reporter, March 19, 1999, Judith Bromberg, review of *The Poisonwood Bible,* p. 13; Judith Bromberg, review of *Small Wonders,* p. 30.
New Republic, March 22, 1999, Lee Siegel, *"Sweet and Low: The Poisonwood Bible,"* p. 30.
New Statesman, December 10, 1993.
Newsweek, July 12, 1993.
New Yorker, April 4, 1988.
New York Times, October 16, 1998, Michiko Kakutani, "No Ice Cream Cones in a Heart of Darkness;" November 2, 2000, Janet Maslin, "Three Story Lines United by the Fecundity of Nature."
New York Times Book Review, April 10, 1988, p. 15; June 5, 1988; June 11, 1989; January 7, 1990; September 2, 1990; June 27, 1993, p. 59; October 15, 1995, p. 21; October 18, 1998, Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Going Native;" November 5, 2000, Jennifer Schuessler, "Men, Women and Coyotes."
Progressive, February, 1996, p. 33; December, 1998, Ruth Conniff, review of *The Poisonwood Bible,* p. 39.
Publishers Weekly, August 31, 1990, p. 46; January 27, 1992, p. 93; August 7, 1995, p. 449; August 10, 1998, review of *The Poisonwood Bible,* p. 366; October 2, 2000, review of *Prodigal Summer,* p. 57.
San Francisco Chronicle, March 6, 1988.
School Library Journal, August, 1992, p. 192; November, 1993; February, 1996, p. 134.
Time, September 24, 1990; November 9, 1998, review of *The Poisonwood Bible,* p. 113.
Tribune Books (Chicago, IL), August 26, 1990, Melissa Pritchard, review of *Animal Dreams.*
Us, October 30, 2000, Michael Tyrell, review of *Prodigal Summer,* p. 49.
USA Today, October 11, 1990.
Utne Reader, July-August, 1993.
Washington Post Book World, September 2, 1990; June 13, 1995, p. 3; October 8, 1995, p. 13.
Women's Review of Books, May, 1988, Margaret Randall, review of *The Bean Trees;* July, 1992, Lorraine Elena Roses, review of *Another America/Otra America*, p. 42.

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Writings by the Author: (Continued)

Online

Barbara Kingsolver Home Page, http://www.kingsolver.com (April 12, 2004).
Book Page, http://www.bookpage.com/ (April 12, 2004), Ellen Kanner, "Barbara Kingsolver Turns to Her Past to Understand the Present" (interview).
KYLit Web site, http://www.english.eku.edu/services/kylit/ (December 5, 1994), George Brosi, "Barbara Kingsolver."
NewsHour Online, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/ (November 24, 1995), David Gergen, interview with Kingsolver.
Salon.com, http://www.salon.com/ (December 16, 1995), "Lit Chat with Barbara Kingsolver."
Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2004.

Reviews:(continued)

Library Journal 4/15/90
Codi Noline returns to the sleepy mining town of Grace, Arizona, to care for her father, who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. It is a bad time for her: disappointed in her personal life, she has closed down her emotions in defense against a heart that cares too easily. "I had quietly begun to hope for nothing at all in the way of love, so as not to be disappointed," she muses. In Grace, she finds friends, allies, and a love that endures. This strong second novel confirms the promise shown in *The Bean Trees* (*LJ* 2/1/88), a deserved critical and commercial success. Kingsolver's characters are winners, especially the women, who take charge of life without fuss or complaint. Her novel compares to those of Ann Tyler in its engaging people and message that is upbeat but realistic. Kingsolver's dedication to complex social and environmental causes enriches the story line. Highly recommended. Previewed in *Prepub Alert, LJ* 4/15/90.- David Keymer, SUNY Inst. of Technology, Utica Copyright 1990 Cahners Business Information.

Animal Dreams. Carolyn Cooke.
The Nation v251.n18 (Nov 26, 1990): pp653(2).
Mark a route from Bobbie Ann Mason's Kentucky through Willa Cather's grainy plains to Georgia O'Keefe's Southwest, and you will have followed Barbara Kingsolver to the spot on the map where she stakes her literary claim. Kingsolver the Kentuckian has been seduced by the high contrasts of Arizona, by the mythic scale of the landscape: the surreal pinks and red dust, canyons and arroyos, prikly pear and acacia trees, petroglyphs written in the walls of rock, the chalky skulls of buffaloes immortal in the dirt.

Arizona is exotic as the Amazon in *Animal Dreams,* Kingsolver's second novel and third work of fiction. Just as Cather's hard-baked plains reflect images of corn bent like the backs of so many yellow-haired Norwegians, so is *Animal Dreams* an elaborate equation between the vibrant landscape and its peoples, the Native Americans whose gentle hands have shaped and lent a rhythm to the land and the later immigrants whose Spanish names Kingsolver slathers on her prose like guacamole on a taco—Emelina and Viola Domingos, Homero, Halimeda and Cosima, Pocha and Juan Teobaldo, Cristobal. Transcending regionalism, Kingsolver makes the Southwest the Garden of Eden, Eldorado and Xanadu rolled into one. It is a state of, well, grace, and she examines the possibilities the town of Grace, Arizona, might imply; being born into Grace, leaving it and returning changed.

Animal Dreams comprises an intelligent, moving chronicle of three lives at different points on a shifting timeline: Cosima (Codi) Noline, the central character, who returns to her hometown of Grace in disgrace, having dropped out of medicine in her first year of residency; her eccentric father, Homero (Doc Homer), who serves Grace both as obstetrician and coroner but suffers from Alzheimer's disease; and Halimeda (Hallie) Noline, Codi's sister, an activist who appears in the novel only in her letters home from Nicaragua. At its best, Animal Dreams resists summary: It aspires to the gluey, webby, inexplicable condition of life. At its weakest, and like Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees* (1988), this one flirts with the condition of heartwarming-ness; in celebrating ordinary life, it looks blindly over the occasional meanness or venality that give texture and contrast to our experience of goodness. There are no bad guys in Kingsolver's Graceful universe. Codi's Pueblo-Apache-Navajo lover gives up his brilliant career in cockfighting because Codi—and his mother—ask him to.

The short story is this: Codi Noline has fallen from Grace. She has gone from med school resident to 7-Eleven clerk in one freefall; she has felt the blue pall of the great world, lost her innocence and her empathy in the mountains of Crete, birthplace of Zeus. Sister Hallie, meantime, has become a hero in the classical mode and is

Reviews: (continued)

off to Nicaragua to save the very soil. Codi, postmodern down to the Billy Idol haircut, tries to save herself. She leaves Carlo, the boyfriend she met back in parasitology, and catches a Greyhound home to Grace, where she spends a year teaching general biology to a gaggle of high school students and chasing down the shadows of her past.

Grace is a town where people roast a goat to make you feel welcome. Everywhere are the brilliant colors of poverty in a warm climate—the reds, oranges and livid purples of the vegetation and women's dresses, the graves meticulously studded with white stones and tequila bottles, "the simplest thing done with the greatest care." Silver loafers pass as haute couture in the airless windows of the Hollywood Shop; the Baptist Grocery survives to recall a time of more serious spiritual divisiveness; and the semilla besada trees are bedecked hopefully with baby socks and the envelopes of pension checks. When Codi returns to Grace after her years in the great world, everyone remembers how tall she was in seventh grade and her orthopedic shoes.

Those who know Kingsolver from *The Bean Trees* and her 1989 story collection *Homeland and Other Stories* will recognize a few familiar riffs. Her characters have a strong sense of science at work in the world and use the plant and animal kingdoms to explain each other. (In a short story called "Covered Bridges," a young woman who lost a sister to a bee sting devotes herself to saving others via a poison hotline; in *Animal Dreams,* Hallie Noline grows restless dispensing agricultural advice on the Tucson houseplant hotline and makes a beeline south to help peasant farmers reclaim soil denatured by poverty and politics.)

The symbolism of Grace (the town) is almost hopelessly heavy-handed, but she redeems herself with her clear and original voice, her smart, plucky women, her eye for the nuances of personality and the depth of her social and moral concerns. Kingsolver can help you learn how to live.

Her previous fiction shows her mind migrating westward from Bobbie Ann Mason country (Kingsolver grew up in eastern Kentucky, the setting of her stories and starting point of her first novel). Like Mason's characters, Kingsolver's are sometimes funnier than they mean to be. But although the spunky voice from her earlier fiction remains in characters like Emelina Domingos ("Shoot, you look like a fifty-dollar bill. Where'd you get that haircut, Paris, France?") and the woman Codi meets on a bus ("'I'm Alice Kimball,' the woman explained. 'I get the worst slugs'"), Kingsolver has here traded some of the raw, hurtling energy of *The Bean Trees* for a spiraling narrative that interweaves Codi's point of view with her father's in a complex investigation of the relationship between memory and truth.

In Doc Homer, Kingsolver brilliantly delineates the quality of a dissolving but wholly practical mind. Lost in time, Doc Homer lives in an overflowing, eternal present. Seeing his 15-year-old daughter pregnant, Doc Homer does not confront her with what he knows, but suffers alone and lets her suffer.

He feels a sharp pain in his spleen when he looks across the breakfast table each morning and sees this: his wife's face. The ghost of their happiest time returned to inhabit the miserable body of their child. He can't help feeling he has damaged them all, just by linking them together. His family is a web of women, dead and alive, with himself at the center like a spider, driven by different instincts. He lies mute, hearing only in the tactile way a spider hears, touching the threads of the web with long extended fingertips and listening. Listening for trapped life.

Reviews: (continued)

Doc Homer has not lost his memory to Alzheimer's, he is drowning in its waves and crosscurrents. Even Codi isn't sure where her father ends and disease begins. Seeing his forceps on the kitchen drainboard, she admits: "This didn't signify any new eccentricity on his part. He'd always had a bizarre sense of utility. I could picture him using the forceps to deliver a head of cabbage from a pot of boiling water. Holding it up. Not in a showoff way, but proud he'd thought of it, as if he were part of a very small club of people who had the brains to put obstetrical instruments to use in the kitchen."

Word gets around that Codi is a doctor bent on amazing Grace—come to save Doc Homer with a miracle cure she learned in Paris, France; come to save the river, which is contaminated by the Black Mountain Mining Company's excretions of sulfuric acid and copper sulfate. Codi demurs. It's her sister Hallie who is the hero, she insists. Hallie is the one who is saving what's worthwhile—rain forests, farmers, the earth itself.

But in Grace heroes are made, not born. They are driven by exigency, by being needed. Even the housewives in the infamous Stitch and Bitch club get serious about saving Grace when events prove dire. (It isn't giving away too much to say that the town, plagued by a toxic river, is saved by a few hundred peacock-feather pinatas.)

What impels us to right action? Kingsolver seems to be asking. How do we know what to do? Codi suffers from chronic insomnia and occasional, lurid dreams. Her Native American lover, Lloyd Peregrina, articulate in the high language of legend, tells her, "Animals dream about the things they do in the daytime, just like people do. If you want sweet dreams you've got to live a sweet life."

Like all good novels, *Animal Dreams* is a web of interlacing news. It is dense and vivid, and makes ever tighter circles around the question of what it means to be alive, how to live rightly and sweetly even as we feel the confining boundaries of the skin, the closing walls of past and present, with memory like a badly wired lamp, spitting sparks and shorting out.

The Arizona pueblo of Malpais is the last refuge of free life in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*—a little nation of outsiders, savages so backward they still believe in history and take their morality from Shakespeare. Grace, Arizona, is Codi Noline's refuge from anonymity and empty life. In Grace she discovers the comforts of tradition and obligation, and migrates from the shapeless melancholia of youth to a deeper humanity—living, as Huxley's savage hopes to, painfully and richly and well.

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Animal Dreams. Paul Gray.
Time v136.n13 (Sept 24, 1990): pp87(1).
Though routinely maligned as a decade of swinish greed, the 1980s also produced a kinder, gentler brand of storytelling, one that might be described as "eco-feminist" fiction. The central plot of this evolving subgenre has become reasonably clear. Women, relying on intuition and one another, mobilize to save the planet, or their immediate neighborhoods, from the ravages—war, pollution, racism, etc.—wrought by white males. This reformation of human nature usually entails the adoption of older, often Native American, ways.

Reviews: (continued)

Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985), an immense novel disguised as an anthropological treatise, contains nearly all the quintessential elements, but significant contributions to the new form have also been made by, among others, Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker.

Now comes Barbara Kingsolver, whose second novel, *Animal Dreams,* is an entertaining distillation of eco-feminist materials. There is the fragile landscape—the fictional town of Grace, Ariz., whose river and Edenic orchards face extinction by the Black Mountain Mining Co. And there is the doughty heroine—Codi Noline, who grew up in Grace and returns home after 14 years of wanderings to teach at the high school and look after her father, the town doctor, who seems to be losing his mind.

Codi certainly does not imagine herself a heroine when she arrives in Grace. "I felt emptied-out and singing with echoes, unrecognizable to myself: that particular feeling like your own house on the day you move out." Codi believes that the brave one in the family is her sister Hallie, three years younger, who has gone to Nicaragua to help peasant farmers. "I'd spent a long time circling above the clouds, looking for life, while Hallie was living it."

But Codi also finds herself busier than she expected. She meets Loyd Peregrina, half Pueblo, half Apache, whom she had dated briefly in high school; she never told him of the pregnancy and miscarriage that followed. Now she and Loyd fall into an affair that threatens to turn serious, not to say somber. He drives her about neighboring reservations and takes her to some ancient Pueblo villages. She begins to see a difference between inhabiting the land and trying to conquer it: "To people who think of themselves as God's houseguest, American enterprise must seem arrogant beyond belief. Or stupid. A nation of amnesiacs, proceeding as if there were no other day but today."

Yes, Codi does have her preachy side, not that it seems to bother Loyd. After she lectures him, he agrees to get rid of his birds and give up cockfighting. There is enough fun in this novel, though, to balance its rather hectoring tone. Codi has a deft way of observing her small, remote hometown, caught uneasily between past and future. When Halloween arrives, she notes, "Grace was at an interesting sociological moment: the teenagers inhaled MTV and all wanted to look like convicted felons, but at the same time, nobody here was worried yet about razor blades in apples." And the matriarchs who make up the town sewing circle, called the Stitch and Bitch Club, are both amusing and formidable.

It is these women, with Codi's help, who set out to save the town from the mining company. Kingsolver introduces other complications, particularly the fate of Hallie, who has been captured by the U.S.-supported contras. To say everything is resolved happily would be misleading, but one hint may be allowed. Anyone who thinks a giant mining concern is any match for the Grace Stitch and Bitch Club has a lot to learn about eco-feminist novels.

Barbara Kingsolver: her fiction features ordinary people heroically committed to political issues. Lisa See Kendall. *Publishers Weekly* v237.n35 (August 31, 1990): pp46(2).
Across the scorched desert toward the lower Tucson Mountains, up a gravel-covered dirt road identifiable only by two weather-bleached yellow pillars, lies a house almost hidden by native cacti and scrub. Here Barbara Kingsolver, author of *The Bean Trees, Homeland and Other Stories* and HarperCollins's soon-to-be released *Animal Dreams* (Fiction Forecasts, June 22), weaves her stories of plucky, sometimes

Reviews: (continued)

downtrodden, characters "ecologically" placed in a world of issues—the U.S. involvement in Central America, Native American traditions, feminism, the environment. Her office is reached through a courtyard draped with grapevines and flourishing with squash. The window looks out across a terrain that to many seems inhospitable but to Kingsolver brings inspiration and solace. On the bulletin board above her computer are several fliers announcing speakers on the underground railroad for South American refugees. On her desk is a paint brush. When the writing gets tough she takes the brush out to the courtyard, where she hand-pollinates her squash blossoms.

Kingsolver and her husband, a chemist at the University of Arizona, have been remodeling this cabin for five years, incorporating original beams into a practical and beautiful modern design. The couple did all the work themselves, consulting how-to's from the local library. Complimented on the extensive tile work, much of which she laid herself, Kingsolver quips, "It represents about 12 nervous breakdowns."

Raised in rural Kentucky, she grew up among farmers. "Our county didn't have a swimming pool and I didn't see a tennis court until I went to Depauw," says Kingsolver, 35. "I didn't grow up among the suburban middle-class. If I wrote a novel with that background, I'd have to do research. It's not that I try to write about poor people or rural people, I am one myself. It's important to illuminate the lives of people who haven't been considered glorious or noteworthy."

Some critics contend that Kingsolver's characters live on the margins of society. "That's a shock to me," she bristles. "I write about people who are living in the dead center of life. The people who are actually living on the margins of society are those you see on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. I like to remind people that there's nothing wrong with living where we are. We're not living 'lives of quiet desperation,' but living in the joyful noise of trying to get through life."

Kingsolver claims she was always a writer. "Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor were the stars in my sky as a child," she says. Later she was influenced by Doris Lessing and Ursula LeGuin, with Faulkner as the one male admitted into her personal constellation. "But I couldn't figure out how you could manage to get paid for being a writer or that you could do it for a living," she says. Beginning in college and through two years traveling in Europe, she took a number of jobs: typesetter, X-ray technician, copy editor, biological researcher and translator of medical documents. After graduate school at the University of Arizona, she became a science writer. Armed with a single creative writing course at Depauw and later a class with author Francine Prose in Arizona, Kingsolver "sneaked" slowly into freelance journalism, selling pieces to the *Progressive,* the *Sonoran Review, Smithsonian* and gradually into short story writing for *Mademoiselle* and *Redbook.*

In 1983, Kingsolver began a book on the long, bitter copper strike against the Phelps Dodge Corporation in Arizona, focusing on the women—mostly union wives—in the isolated company town of Clifton. "People's internal landscapes turned out to be so interesting. The women earned a sense of themselves and their own value and personal power. When I first interviewed them, they'd say things like they didn't go out of the house without their husband's permission. By the end of the strike, these same women were going on national speaking tours." A year later, she'd written half of the book, but her agent was having a hard time placing it.

Reviews: (continued)

Kingsolver went back to freelance work. In 1985, she found herself pregnant and suffering from terrible insomnia. Her doctor recommended that she scrub the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush. Instead she sat in a closet and began to write *The Bean Trees*—about a woman who leaves a rural life in Kentucky for the urban world of Tucson, where she encounters the sanctuary movement. "I saw that book as a catalogue of all the things I believe in, and not in any way commercial." If baby Camille hadn't been three weeks late, Kingsolver observes, she might not have finished the novel. Her agent, Frances Goldin, read the book overnight and called in the morning to say she wanted to auction it. "I look back on that time as a never-never land," says Kingsolver. "To be able to write with no one looking over your shoulder! Now I try to pretend I'm back in that closet."

She took her advance from *The Bean Trees,* finished Holding the Line (published by ILR Press of Cornell University in 1989) and began a book of short stories that she was determined would be different from her first novel. "People always say that a first novel sounds so much like the author," says Kingsolver. "I think that's certainly true of *The Bean Trees.* The voice of Taylor, the main character, was very strong, and she wanted to tell all of my stories. I've had to lock her away." In *Homeland and Other Stories,* Kingsolver again dealt with many of the same political themes, but seen through the eyes of a menopausal woman, a male biology teacher, an old Native American woman and other so-called "marginal" characters. "In *Homeland*, I was really stretching my voice and trying to break into the land of real fiction," she says.

In *Animal Dreams,* the author has taken all of her previous themes—Native Americans, U.S. involvement in Nicaragua, environmental issues, parental relationships, women's taking charge of their own lives—tossed them into a literary pot and created a perfectly constructed novel. In the book, Codi Noline—bereft of her sister, who's left for Nicaragua to fight for social justice—returns to her hometown where she confronts her painful past, a father afflicted with Alzheimer's, family tragedy and an environmental disaster. "*Animal Dreams* is about five novels," concedes Kingsolver. "About two-thirds of the way through I realized I wasn't just a fool; I had jumped out of a plane and the parachute wouldn't open. I wanted to go back to bed, but Harper had already designed the book jacket." She turned on the answering machine, yelled at her family, pollinated the squash and set about answering the questions she had asked.

While Kingsolver has, in fact, answered all of them admirably, her subjects and themes won't disappear. "Those issues will keep turning up in everything I write. They're central to my reason for living. The only authentic and moving fiction you can write is about the things that are the most urgent to you and worth disturbing the universe over. If you're willing to get up and face a blank page every day for a year or more, then it has to be an idea you're willing to be married to.

"The issues are fundamentally related, fundamentally the same. I wasn't really trying to drive five horses, but one horse. I don't want to be reductionist, but all of the issues can be reduced to a certain central idea—seeing ourselves as part of something larger. The individual issues are all aberrations that stem from a central disease of failing to respect the world and our place in it."

In *Animal Dreams,* Codi learns to place herself within her family, then the community, then the political world. The Stitch and Bitch Club, a group of women who have spent years making hand towels and gossiping, harnesses its talents to save the fictional town of Grace, so much like the real-life strike-stricken community of Clifton. "The women knew how to fight to save their town. They knew how to do ordinary things to maintain life. I like stories about ordinary people doing heroic things that are heroic only if you look close enough."

Reviews: (continued)

Can a novelist truly educate and change the world about man's basic inhumanity to man? "I have to believe that, don't I?" she answers. "What keeps me going is the hope that I might be able to leave the world a little more reasonable and just. I grew up in the '60s when convictions were fashionable. We believed we could end the war just by raising a ruckus. I've been raising a ruckus ever since." Ten years ago, Kingsolver was writing mimeographed leaflets on the "outright villainy" of what was happening in El Salvador or on the building of the Palo Verde Nuclear Power Plant; she believes that her job description hasn't changed much. But with fiction, Kingsolver maintains, the author must both refrain from diatribe and respect the reader.

That balance may have its origins in Kingsolver's own choice of physical environment and habitat. After years of what she terms a "rolling stone existence," Kingsolver—liking the sound of Tucson but knowing absslutely nothing about it—went there for what she thought would be a few weeks. "The Southwest appealed to me on hearsay," she says. "I thought it would be a wide open place that would allow for some eccentricity." That was 14 years ago.

"I probably would have become a writer no matter where I was, but the Southwest has informed my subjects. Culturally, the Southwest is so rich. I can drive from here to Albuquerque and pass through a half-dozen nations." The Central American issues which infuse her work come from living in an area that derives its cultural plurality both from the people who've been there for hundreds of years and from the refugees who come from the south. "A lot of my friends are refugees and they got here because our government dropped phosphorous bombs on their villages. How can you not do something about that?"

Kingsolver's "anthropologist's heart" has compelled her to seek out different world views. "For research, I look for open doors, read what there is, depend on friends." For *Animal Dreams,* that meant poring over doctoral dissertations on kinship relations, as well as visiting a pueblo. Kingsolver believes that Americans have a lot to learn from cultures like the Navaho and Pueblo, whose cultural myths have less to do with conquest and more to do with cooperation. "I don't even like to use a word like 'religion,' because all Pueblo life is religious. It's about keeping this appointment with humility which reminds us of our kinship with the natural world. I was trained as a biologist, so I know intellectually that human beings are one of a number in the animal and plant family. We are only as healthy as our food chain and the environment. The Pueblo corn dances say the same things, only spiritually. Whereas in our culture, we think we're it. The Earth was put here as a garden for us to conquer and use. That way of thought was productive for years, but it's beginning to do us in now."

In her new novel, backed by a 45,000-copy first printing, first serial rights to *Confetti*, and a 15-city tour, Kingsolver isn't about to lose the casual reader over ideas, ideals or philosophy. "If people are provided with information, then they can draw their own conclusions," she says. "A novel can educate to some extent. But first, a novel has to entertain—that's the contract with the reader: you give me 10 hours and I'll give you a reason to turn the page. I have a commitment to accessibility. I believe in plot. I want an English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want one of my relatives—who's never read anything but the Sears catalogue—to read my books."

Animal Dreams Discussion Topics from Barbara Kingsolver's website http://www.kingsolver.com

Discussion Topics:

1. Why are Hallie and Codi different? What happened that caused them to take such different life paths? How and why does Codi change? Why does she become more engaged with the world?

2. One theme of the novel is the relationship between humans and the natural world. What does the novel have to say about the difference between Native American and Anglo American culture in relation to nature? How do creation stories, such as the Pueblo creation legend and the Garden of Eden story, continue to influence culture and behavior?

3. How do you feel about Doc Homer? What kind of parent was he, and why? In what ways did his strange point of view serve as a vehicle for the novel's themes of memory, amnesia, and identity?

Guide from Harper and Row (1)

Spotlight on:
Animal Dreams

About the Book:

Barbara Kingsolver, born in 1955, grew up in a rural section of eastern Kentucky. She began to write as a young child, keeping a private journal for some years, but she did not consider writing as a career. As Kingsolver herself puts it, the writers she knew "were mostly old, dead men from England. It was inconceivable that I might grow up to be one of those myself" (www.kingsolver.com/about/about.asp).

She moved to Indiana to attend DePauw University, where she graduated with her degree in 1977 and then moved on to graduate work in biology at the University of Arizona in Tucson. She completed her master's degree at Tucson and took on a number of jobs in the next years: copy editor, medical technician, researcher, house cleaner, and translator.

Her experience writing in the sciences at Arizona led her to a job writing features for magazines and newspapers, and she proved to be excellent at the work, eventually winning an Arizona Press Club award. (Her best essays were collected in the book *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never,* and the book sold well when it appeared in 1995.) She began writing fiction, too, during this period, usually at night. She married in 1985 and became pregnant the next year, and when she began to suffer insomnia during this time, she sat up at nights writing the book that would become *The Bean Trees* (1988), a story about a woman who leaves her home in Kentucky for Tucson. This novel sold well and received positive press from many critics, and to this day has never gone out of print. Her writing also earned her an honorary Doctorate of Letters in 1995 from her alma mater, DePauw.

Kingsolver focused increasingly on her fiction, and in the next few years published *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989), *Animal Dreams* (1990), and *Pigs in Heaven* (1993). These works were set either in Appalachia or the Southwest, but Kingsolver changed locations completely for her fourth novel, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998). This was the novel that brought her true commercial success. The book was a bestseller for months and was an Oprah Book Club selection, guaranteeing several hundred thousand sales. The story departed a bit from her previous work in that it focused on a missionary family in Africa and the effects of that African experience on each member of the family. *Prodigal Summer* appeared in October of 2000, and again won praise for the depth of its characters and the interwoven strands of three separate but related narratives. In 2002, Kingsolver published *Small Wonder,* a set of twenty-three essays that focus on the nature of everyday life.

Kingsolver still lives in the two places she knows best, dividing her time between Tucson and a farm back East. When asked to describe her own philosophy of writing, Kingsolver sums it up this way: "A novel has to entertain —that's the contract with the reader: you give me ten hours and I'll give you a reason to turn every page. I have a commitment to accessibility. I believe in plot. I want an English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want the people I grew up with—who may not often read anything but the Sears catalogue to read my books" (www.kingsolver.com/about/about.asp).

About the Book:

Codi Noline returns to her hometown of Grace, Arizona to care for her estranged father, Doc Homer, whose mind is slowly deteriorating. Her sister Hallie has just left for Nicaragua, where she plans to work with the Communists to help build a new social order. Hallie's loss has left Codi feeling alone in the world, and returning to Grace does nothing to ease that feeling. Codi has no good memories of Grace, a place that always made her feel like an outsider, but she has nowhere else to go and her father needs help. But as she settles into the town, it surprises Codi to find herself making friendships with women who have led very different lives from her own. Even more surprising is that she falls in love with a high school sweetheart, the Apache Loyd Peregrina.

Guide from Harper and Row (2)

Spotlight on:
Animal Dreams

Soon after arriving in Grace, Codi discovers that the town's river has been polluted by runoff from the local mine. Rather than clean up their operation, the mine wants to reroute the river away from populated areas, a move that would destroy Grace's vast orchards. Codi helps to rally the town's women against this plan, and they launch an inventive fundraising campaign to save the town. She also gets word from Nicaragua that her sister has been kidnapped, but there is little she can do to help.

Codi and Loyd grow closer, even though she insists that she will leave Grace after one year. Her relationship with him is complicated because Codi was pregnant with Loyd's baby back in high school, though she never told him. She miscarried, and the memory of that night haunts both Codi and Doc Homer. But Loyd has changed since high school. He gives up cock-fighting after Codi urges him to quit the sport, he shows her local ruins that are important to him, and finally takes her on a trip to visit his mother and sisters up on the reservation. When they return, bad news comes: Hallie has been killed.

The women of Grace have generated enough publicity about the river that the mine announces it will halt its dam project and stop polluting the river altogether. But happy as she is, Codi continues to grieve for her sister and for her father, who wanders further into madness.

Doc Homer does die shortly, but Codi forges a connection with him that she never had as a child. And though she misses Hallie terribly, she has learned a significant lesson from Hallie's life: the importance of having a home. Though tempted to run away from her problems once more, Codi instead chooses to remain with Loyd and to make a life in Grace. It isn't what she had planned for her life, but in the end it turns out to be what she wants.

Discussion Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

What is it that makes Hallie so different from Codi?

Hallie is never "onstage" in the novel; the closest we come to hearing from her is through her letters and through Codi's memories. Even though she is thousands of miles away in Nicaragua, though, she exerts a powerful influence over Codi. That influence is rooted in Codi's jealousy at the way Hallie seems at home anywhere that life takes her. Codi, by contrast, feels at home nowhere, not even in her hometown. The difference was there even in childhood. Despite the strict and almost loveless home environment provided by Doc Homer, Codi remembers that "Hallie thrived anyway—the blossom of our family, like one of those miraculous fruit trees that taps into an invisible vein of nurture and bears radiant bushels of plums while the trees around it merely go on living. In Grace, in the old days, when people found one of those in their orchard they called it the *semilla besada*—the seed that got kissed" (p. 49).

But even though Codi sees the basic difference between her and Hallie, she doesn't understand why it's there. "The strangest thing is that where pain seemed to have anesthetized me, it gave Hallie extra nerve endings," Codi says of their upbringing. "This haunts me. What we suffered in our lives we went through together, but

somehow we came out different doors, on different ground levels" (p. 89). Both were raised in the same home, the same way. How did Hallie turn out so differently?

The question is not simply one of psychological interest. It is of vital importance for Codi's own life. She wants to understand how to be at home in her own life instead of running continually from town to town and job to job, seeking something she only dimly understands. As we can see from the previous quotes, Codi recognizes the difference between her and her sister, but can only ascribe it to a sort of magic—Hallie is the *semilla besada;* she came out a "different door." These are not explanations, only descriptions, and they do not help Codi make a place for herself in Grace.

She spends much of the novel pondering the difference between her and her sister, but only late in the novel does she gain clarity. "I was getting a dim comprehension of the difference between Hallie and me," she says. "It wasn't a matter of courage or dreams, but something a whole lot simpler. A pilot would call it ground orientation. I'd spent a long time circling above the clouds, looking for life, while Hallie was living it" (p. 225). When she was alive, Hallie realized that life was found everywhere, that you did not have to go looking for it somewhere. Life could be found, and a home could be made, anywhere in the world. You simply had to get involved with people and the community; you had to start living. Codi's tendency is to hold back and to look for a home and a life before attempting to get involved. The realization that this approach is backwards leads her to stay on in Grace and to stay with Loyd at the novel's end.

Why is Codi so afraid of love?

When we first meet Codi, she seems like a woman desperately searching for love. She feels alone in the world when she returns to Grace and longs to find a place that she can call a home. Yet when a relationship with Loyd starts to develop, Codi finds herself pulling back repeatedly. Even though love is the one thing she most desires, it is also something she deeply fears.

The roots of this fear are revealed only gradually in the novel, but they extend back to Codi's childhood. Doc Homer's household was not a place where love was openly displayed. To compensate, Codi developed a mythical version of her mother, a woman who died when Codi was an infant. She made her mother into a warm, caring woman who used to provide everything that Doc Homer could not. This failed to provide the love that Codi needed, for obvious reasons, and so in adolescence Codi sought love not in memories, but in romantic relationships. Eventually she got pregnant and began to hope that her child would provide the love that other people had not. "At first it was nothing like a baby I held inside me, only a small impossible secret," she remembers. "Slowly it grew to a force as strong and untouchable as thunder. I would be loved absolutely" (p. 51).

But things did not turn out that way. Codi miscarried the child, and eventually believed that love was something she did not deserve. "I'd marked myself early on as a bad risk, undeserving of love and incapable of benevolence.... I'd lost what there was to lose: first my mother and then my baby. Nothing you love will stay. Hallie could call that attitude a crutch, but she didn't know, she hadn't loved and lost so deeply" (p. 233).

Since she could never have a permanent guarantee of love, Codi would rather have the security of rejecting love altogether. She throws up barriers to love in her own life because she distrusts it, and it takes Loyd's persistent attentions to start knocking them down. He is the one who convinces her that love does not require a guarantee. It will be lost, but not forever. Other people will come along; other loves will arrive. Codi dislikes this idea.

"You can't replace people you love with other people," I said. "They're not like old shoes or something."
"No. But you can trust that you're not going to run out of people to love." (p. 297)

Loyd wins her over to his way of seeing things, and Codi gradually accepts the risks of loving others. Instead of dwelling on the ways she has been abandoned or let down, she takes a risk on Loyd and on Grace, deciding to stay on after all.

What does Codi find in Grace that leads her to stay?

Codi comes to Grace seeking a home. She has a faint hope that her return to her birth place will provide her with a home, though even she knows that this hope is based more on wishes than on reality. When she does arrive in town, she finds that she is still an outsider. "I was a stranger to Grace," she says. "I'd stayed away fourteen years and in my gut I believe I was hoping that had changed: I would step off the bus and land smack in the middle of a sense of belonging. Ticker tape, apologies, the luxury of forgiveness, home at last.... None of this happened. Grace looked like a language I didn't speak" (p. 12).

Along the way, this sense of alienation fades. Much of this is due to Loyd, but it takes more than a romantic relationship to give Codi a sense of belonging. She has had romantic relationships before, and none of them provided the security that she sought. The clue to what Codi seeks is found in her recurring dream of blindness, the one that consists only of a loud pop and then a complete and terrifying darkness. She understands the dream to be a fear of being utterly rootless, a person without context or community: "I understood that the terror of my recurring dream was not about losing just vision, but the whole of myself, whatever that was. What you lose in blindness is the space around you, the place where you are, and without that you might not exist. You could be nowhere at all" (p. 204).

Codi needs to belong somewhere, just as a balloon needs to be tethered to something to keep from drifting away. Loyd provides one of those connections to Grace, anchoring her in place, but it takes more than Loyd. It takes a broader acceptance, the kind that she finds among the women of the Stitch and Bitch club and among the students that she teaches. She finds it with Emelina and T.J., the couple that she lives with, and she finds it when Do? a Althea acknowledges Codi as one of her relations at the book's end. These various relationships all provide a context for Codi's own sense of self, the context she is terrified of losing in her dream. In just one year, the people of Grace attach themselves to Codi in a strong enough way that it becomes difficult for her to leave. In contrast, in her many years with Carlo she never developed such an attachment either to him or to any of the places in which they lived. The choice to leave is still hers to make, of course, but when she does try to run away in the end, she finds a life of wandering so unattractive when compared to life back in Grace that she returns.

How are "animal dreams" important to the novel?

The way that animals dream is not discussed at length in the book, but Loyd and Codi do have a discussion about the topic. Loyd says that animals dream only about those things they do during the day, and that people are basically the same. He tells Codi,

"Your dreams, what you hope for and all that, it's not separate from your life. It grows right up out of it."
"So you think we all just have animal dreams. We can't think of anything to dream about except our ordinary lives."
He gently moved a lock of hair out of my eyes. "Only if you have an ordinary life. If you want sweet dreams,

you've got to live a sweet life" (p. 133).

The conversation is important because it highlights an essential facet of Codi's current life situation in Grace. She wants to have dreams and plans and a wonderful, exciting life, but she has found herself working a series of boring and dead-end jobs, and has spent the last few years in a relationship that is going nowhere. She has a depressing outlook on life. In such a situation, it's not surprising that she does not have a vibrant set of dreams.

Codi struggles to find a place for herself, but she goes about finding one in the wrong way. She tries to look for a place she can call home before living in the community and getting to know the people. She wants to dream large dreams without falling in love or growing strong friendships. In her desire to gaze into the future, she neglects her present. She describes it this way: "I wasn't keeping to any road, I was running, forgetting what lay behind and always looking ahead for the perfect home, where trains never wrecked and hearts never broke, where no one you loved ever died. Loyd was a trap I could still walk out of" (p. 236).

Her decision to commit to Loyd and to the friends she has made in Grace marks a major change in her thinking. She is not convinced that Grace is the perfect spot for her, nor does she conquer all her doubts about Loyd. Yet she stays anyway. She allows herself to enjoy life in Grace and trusts Loyd's belief that dreams and hopes will grow out of such a life.

Does Doc Homer change?

Doc Homer has great difficulty showing love to his children. Though Codi wishes this would change, she is not optimistic, and she is largely proved right. She remembers Doc Homer's household as an efficient but sterile place in which she had to wear orthopedic shoes and could not even talk about her pregnancy with her own father. And if this were the only picture of Doc Homer that we had, he would look like a heartless old man who never learned to love. But the point of the brief "Homero" chapters in the novel is to give us a different perspective and a measure of compassion for Doc Homer as we watch his mind deteriorate.

Seen from this perspective, Doc Homer becomes a different person—not a man without love, but a man who doesn't know how to show that love to his two daughters. In one of his memories, he thinks about Codi as a young woman. "She sighs loudly. She must be fourteen. In a year she will be sullen and furtively pregnant. Or has that passed too? He doesn't even look at her because there is too much there, and he's afraid. She is his first child, his favorite, every mistake he ever made" (p. 170).

Doc Homer loves his kids, but this memory illustrates the great fear which accompanies that love. Love is a burden, a heavy weight, an obligation that he is terrified of trying to meet. When he sees Codi, he sees only his mistakes, and they are a burden to him. His rigid perfectionism might be an asset to his medical career, but it falls apart completely when applied to child-rearing. Doc Homer will not allow himself to make mistakes, but as he sees the various mistakes he has made in raising his girls, he begins to withdraw from them out of fear.

At the end of the novel, even as his mind disintegrates and his memories run backwards and forwards across each other, Doc Homer does conquer this fear at last. Codi doesn't see it, and so from her perspective Doc Homer dies the same person that he always was. But in his last, brief chapter, Homer watches his daughter and he thinks back over her life and his own, and he sees "for the first time in his life that love weighs nothing" (p. 335). He is able to see love as something that does not require perfection, and he can experience it for the first time as something other than a burden. The tragedy of this realization lies in how late it comes—after Hallie's death, and

after Homer can no longer express himself.

Why is Doc Homer's mental illness important to the story?

Doc Homer has Alzheimer's, which is thematically important in the novel because it does to Doc Homer what he tried to do to his own past. As Codi discovers, Doc Homer is not actually from Illinois after all, but from Grace. He changed his name when he left. When he returned, he attempted to bury his past and to live as though it did not exist. "I became a man with no history," he admits. "No guardian angels. I turned out to be a brute beast after all. I didn't redeem my family, I buried it and then I built my grand house on top of the grave. I changed my name" (p. 287). Alzheimer's is doing the same thing to Doc Homer, though against his will. It is erasing and jumbling his past, but it does not grant him any control over the process. Doc Homer, who has always been in such control of his legacy and his image, finds it being taken away from him bit by bit.

Doc Homer's Alzheimer's is linked to the way that he has lived his life, but it also ties in with the book's larger criticism of Americans as people who forget their past. Hallie points out repeatedly that America is a "nation in love with forgetting" (p. 149). One of her examples is "when Castro released those prisoners from Mariel: One day the headlines said we'd gotten him to free all these wonderful political prisoners. A month later when they were burning down halfway houses in Miami the papers castigated Fidel for exporting his hooligans and junkies" (p. 61). But Hallie's most persistent criticism concerns Nicaragua, where she has gone to live. She accuses the contras there of slaughtering farmers and burning their fields, while back home people blame the Communists for these various atrocities (p. 61). She believes that Americans allow themselves to forget history and will accept whatever is fed to them by the media and the government.

Alzheimer's is a more personal form of this forgetting and misinterpretation. America has always been a country in love with the idea of a "fresh start" and a cleansing of the past. But this habit of erasing the past can also become a disease like Alzheimer's, where the nation forgets without wanting to and without even knowing it. The results are no less sad than what happens to Doc Homer's mind.

Why does Codi resist a romance with Loyd?

Codi learns important lessons about herself when she thinks through her reactions to Loyd's attention. The most obvious one is that she feels deeply conflicted about love. On the one hand, love is a source of potential pain, and Codi wants to insulate herself from pain: "At some time in my life I'd honestly hoped love would rescue me from the cold, drafty castle I lived in. But at another point, much earlier I think, I'd quietly begun to hope for nothing at all in the way of love, so as not to be disappointed. It works. It gets to be a habit" (p. 117).

On the other hand, she desires love deeply. At first she keeps Loyd at a distance, out of habit, but when at last he kisses her, Codi is surprised by her body's own reaction. "The night of the story of Jack, he also kissed me before he left, and I was surprised by how I responded. Kissing Loyd was delicious, like some drug I wanted more of in spite of the Surgeon General's warning" (p. 105). The truth is that Codi doesn't want to remain loveless, despite the habits of many years. Though scared of the consequences a relationship may bring, Codi badly wants to be loved.

But she has ideas about who she can love, and Loyd does not fit neatly into them. She has a lingering distrust of him because of his high school reputation as a guy who slept around, and Codi does not want to be duped by someone only feigning interest in her to get her into bed. He already did it once, and the result was

her pregnancy and miscarriage. These are certainly a legitimate worries and good reasons for Codi to progress slowly.

But Codi has less creditable concerns about Loyd; specifically, she sees him as an uneducated Indian with whom she could have little in common. It takes her some time to realize that she feels this way, and when she does, she is ashamed. "I couldn't see myself with a roughneck Apache hoghead," she says. "I felt myself blush. I was just like Doc Homer, raising himself and Hallie and me up to be untouched by Grace" (p. 115). Codi sees her own habit of holding back from people and places, in part because she thinks that she already knows them. In the case of Loyd, of course, she finds that her stereotype of the man does not live up to the reality. When she gets to know him, he charms her and her resistance gradually falls.

She does not want to believe that she is the kind of person who holds simple stereotypes about people and is shocked to realize the truth. But she also holds stereotypes about the kind of person that could make her happy. As her relationship with Carlo has proved, though, a medical degree and a sharp mind do not make a happy relationship on their own. And Codi eventually realizes that Loyd's not as dumb as she once thought, and that in his job as a railroad engineer he has to make difficult calculations that have life and death consequences.

In a reversal of their high school roles, it turns out to be Codi who wants to keep the relationship a short-term one. She repeatedly tells Loyd that she plans to leave Grace after a year and that he should not plan on her sticking around just for him. She holds herself back emotionally from his advances, and several times considers returning to Carlo. Loyd, by contrast, has become a caring man who rejects his old high school persona and pursues Codi single-mindedly. He is the one who wants a deeper and more committed relationship. Codi's attitude toward Loyd reflects her habits of the last decade, and it takes both Loyd's persistence and Codi's own growth to overcome them.

Further Reading:

Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958)
This classic short novel tells the story of Holly Golightly, a young woman with a mysterious past who has come to New York seeking a new life. She finds it among a glamorous and decadent set of friends and lovers, but they are not enough to root her to one place for long.

Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940)
The writer George Webber returns to his hometown after publishing a frank novel about the place, and he finds such anger from those who did not appreciate their portrayal in the book that he is forced to leave town once more. He begins a quest to find a home, first in New York, then in Paris and in a Berlin where Hitler has just come to power. He returns home in the end to America and sees it with different eyes—and a measure of hope.

Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (1988)
In Atwood's powerful novel about friendships between four women in Toronto, she chronicles their lives, from school days to mature adulthood, in a style that moves back and forth through time to explore the connections between them all.

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (2001)
Franzen's National Book Award-winning *The Corrections* tells the story of the dysfunctional Lambert family. The three children struggle to make their own very different lives, far from their Midwestern upbringing.

Guide from Harper and Row (8)

Spotlight on:
Animal Dreams

Anne Tyler, *Back When We Were Grownups* (2001)
Tyler's book chronicles a middle-aged woman's attempt to resurrect a self that she lost many years before, to see if she can understand who she has become. She wonders about the choices that she's made, and if it's possible to go back and do things that she once turned her back on.

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This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Nathan Anderson, a novelist living in Wheaton, IL.